

Ex-Prober: CIA Ignored Drug Issue

Agency Didn't Encourage Trafficking by Contras, Senate Panel Told

By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer

The former counsel to a Senate subcommittee that investigated connections between narcotics traffickers and CIA-supported Nicaraguan contra rebels in the 1980s told a Senate panel yesterday that CIA officers did not engage in drug dealing or encourage it, but "had to be blind not to have seen it."

Jack A. Blum, now a Washington attorney, told a packed hearing of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence of congressional findings that were completed eight years ago but have drawn fresh interest in recent months as a result of a controversial newspaper series. Blum worked on a Democratic-led Senate subcommittee that concluded in 1988 that the Reagan administration had repeatedly placed a higher priority on battling Nicaraguan leftists than on fighting drug trafficking.

Blum said the panel found that CIA officers running the covert operations against the Nicaraguan government had the attitude, "Our job is to win this war against the Sandinistas. . . . If there's drug trafficking, let the DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] deal with it . . . and please don't let that other mission interfere with what we have to do."

While criticizing the CIA for not preventing its contractors from making arrangements with drug dealers, Blum directed his harshest condemnation at Reagan administration officials who, he said, "closed their eyes to the criminal behavior of some of America's allies and supporters in the contra wars."

Blum was the first witness in what Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), the intelligence panel chairman, said might be a long committee inquiry into charges triggered by the San Jose Mercury News in August. The paper alleged that Nicaraguan drug dealers who it said belonged to the CIA-supported contras played a critical role in introducing crack cocaine in black neighborhoods in Los Angeles and in the rest of the country in the 1980s,

while sending millions of dollars of drug profits to support the anti-Sandinista war effort.

The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and New York Times have published lengthy reports this month raising major challenges to conclusions of the San Jose paper's series, and the Mercury News has published a lengthy follow-up article that acknowledged doubts about some of its original findings.

Blum took issue with a main finding of the Mercury News series, as

he disputed that the drug dealing in Los Angeles helped fund the contras.

Blum also said his subcommittee's investigation, which was chaired by Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), did not find any CIA employees involved in the drug trade but added, "The United States government ignored the drug problem and subverted law enforcement to prevent embarrassment and to reward our allies in the contra war."

The panel's two other witnesses yesterday, CIA inspector general Frederick P. Hitz and Justice Department inspector general Michael R. Bromwich, both described to the committee the vast number of documents they must review before they could estimate how long their own inquiries could take. Both the CIA and Justice Department ordered internal investigations in response to widespread demands for an inquiry, particularly from African American leaders, following the newspaper series.

After noting he had done the internal agency inquiries into the agency's failure for nine years to catch confessed spy Aldrich H. Ames and human rights abuses in Guatemala, Hitz said the "allegations of CIA involvement in narcotics trafficking are the most controversial, politically charged and potentially

damaging of any we have looked at."

Specter repeatedly sought but did not get from either an estimate of when they would finish their investigations.

The committee chairman and the panel's ranking minority member, Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.), both raised questions about whether the two inspectors general had enough power to carry out an investigation that a suspicious public would accept.

Hitz said his investigative power was limited to the agency and current agency employees. He said he could not compel testimony or subpoena documents from former agency employees who probably make up the bulk of those involved in the contra operations that began in 1981 and concluded in 1988.

Bromwich said he could subpoena documents, but not compel testimony from witnesses.

After the hearing, Specter said it may take a select congressional committee to handle the full scope of an inquiry that could go back into the Iran-contra scandal of the Reagan administration. That would be a decision for the next Congress, Specter said.

During his testimony, Blum

charged that the Justice Department blocked the Kerry subcommittee's inquiry in the late 1980s into allegations that the CIA intervened in court cases "to help people who helped in the covert wars." When asked who was responsible for what he described as "an absolute stone wall," Blum named William F. Weld, then assistant attorney general in charge of the criminal division and now governor of Massachusetts locked in a tight race with Kerry.

Blum also accused Weld of "systematically" trying to discredit the Kerry investigation by preventing

U.S. attorneys from cooperating with them.

Blum ticked off several countries—Panama, Haiti and Honduras—where the subcommittee eight years ago found Reagan administration officials were aware that intelligence officers were tolerating drug dealing by local citizens viewed as friendly to U.S. interests.

In questioning Hitz, Kerry brought out that previous CIA internal inquiries took only a few days before concluding there was no “credible information” that the contras were involved in drug trafficking or the agency knew or encouraged such activities.

Hitz, while saying he was “not yet in a position to vouch for these conclusions,” told the senators that a 1987 internal intelligence community inquiry took only 12 days and found “no indication that anti-Sandinista groups that have received or now are receiving support from the U.S. government have engaged in drug trafficking to fund their operations.”

A 1988 review sought by then Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Robert M. Gates took only three days and absolved the agency’s clandestine branch. Another memo responding to Gates reported, “All allegations implying that the CIA condoned, abetted or participated in narcotics trafficking are absolutely false.”

Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) said after the session that she and others disturbed by the allegations were “in for the long haul.”

“Mr. CIA,” she said to the television cameras, “you stand accused.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION 

To read The Post's investigative report on the San Jose Mercury News article and the original Mercury News stories, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>